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ABSTRACT

The activities and behavioral patterns associated with the first stage of "taking charge" by a new college president are examined, based on a sample of 14 new presidents: four from major research universities, four from community colleges, three from public four-year colleges, and three from private colleges. The presidents had been in office for 3 years or less at the time they were interviewed. Of concern were the presidents' initial impressions of the institution, the actions they took when they first arrived, the most important problems they had to address immediately, and their recommendations for what new presidents should do during the first few months in office. Most presidents used both passive and active approaches as they employed four routes to discovery: presidents read to obtain information; they learned about the college from senior faculty and other staff; they talked to as many people on campus as possible; and they quickly became familiar with the budget. Circumstances that modified the workings of the discovery process included: institutions in crisis, presidents who had already been employed by the college before assuming this top post, and presidents who had previously served in this post elsewhere. (SW)

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The Discovery Stage of Presidential Succesion

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This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education held at the Sheraton Inner Harbor Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland, November 21-24, 1987. This paper was reviewed by ASHE and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC collection of ASHE conference papers.

Introduction

More than 300 new college and university presidents take office annually. Once the formal ceremonies are over--and sometimes before--new presidents use a variety of strategies to "take charge" of their institutions: they reorganize, they build their own administrative teams, they announce new programs, and they perform other acts which are intended to symbolize the beginning of a new and different era for the institution. Even though presidential accession might seem self-evidently to be an event of considerable importance, beyond the anecdotal little is known about it or about the institutional responses that are likely to accompany it. This exploratory research study describes the activities and behavioral patterns associated with the first stage of "taking charge."

The Process of Taking Charge

The exit of an administrative incumbent and the entrance of a new one--the process of executive succession--is a major organizational event. Presidential succession is a process that begins with the creation of a vacancy and concludes with the process of taking charge by

the newcomer. This paper will focus on the first stage of the process of taking charge by new college and university presidents.

In business firms, taking charge has been defined as "the process of learning and taking action that a manager goes through until he (or she) has mastered a new assignment in sufficient depth to be running the organization as well as resources and constraints allow" (Gabarro, 1985, p. 111). In this context mastery means "acquiring a grounded understanding of the organization, its tasks, people, environment, and problems" (Gabarro, 1987, p. 6).

A study of new managers of business firms, (Gabarro, 1987) revealed that during their first three years in office, they go through a five-stage process: taking hold, immersion, reshaping, consolidation, and refinement. Each stage is characterized by distinctive learning processes, and by an increase in complexity of the actions the new manager initiates. For example, during the taking-hold stage the new manager is likely to take corrective measures, while in the reshaping stage he is likely to make most of the major organizational changes he will attempt. Previous experience, situational factors, and personal and interpersonal characteristics influence how managers take charge, the actions they take, the kinds of problems they are likely to face, and their

chances for success.

Although the term "taking charge" may seem more appropriate for heads of business organizations, presidents of colleges and universities go through stages in "taking charge" of their positions. For example, it has been suggested that during the first eighteen months in office presidents go through a phase in which they learn the territory, get to know campus constituencies, and establish directions for the new administration (Desruisseaux, 1983). Preliminary data from a study of presidential leadership has shown that new college presidents experience a sequence of overlapping activities during the first thirty-six months in office which are sufficiently distinct to be regarded as stages of taking charge (Bensimon, in progress). These stages, however, appear to be different from those experienced by new manangers of business firms. The first stage, which is the topic of this paper, has been labeled <u>discovery</u>. It consists of activities by which the president comes to know the institution such as reading, asking questions, talking to key people, and becomes known as its president such as making speeches and making connections with influential individuals and groups.

To sketch the other three stages, the second stage involves <u>setting a tone</u>. It consists of actions and decisions specifically intended "to make a statement"

about what the new presidents' tenure will be like, the values he hopes to inculcate, or the future he envisions for the institution. Decisions and actions that set a tone are often dramatic, controversial, unexpected, and quick. The third stage centers on team building. It consists of assessing and replacing administrative staff, creating new positions, and upgrading old ones. The fourth stage involves planning and reorganization. It consists of program review activities, strategic planning, eliminating programs or creating new ones, and making changes in the institutional mission.

Although the process of taking charge is described as consisting of four "stages," this is not intended to imply that a stage invariably begins only when the previous one is completed. Some presidents may experience parts of different stages simultaneously, while others may experience some but not all of them. Some presidents may go through all stages in their first twelve months, others may take considerably longer years.

For a new college president, the process of taking charge is highly complex and subject to a variety of influences, many of which are neither readily observable or easily understood. In view of frequent changes in the presidency and institutional diversity, understanding the process of taking charge, particularly in terms of the influence of organizational and background characteristics

of presidents, seems extremely important for institutions of higher education.

Methodology

This study is based on a purposive sample (Selltiz, et. al, 1976) of 14 "new" presidents: four from major research universities, four from community colleges, three from public four-year colleges, and three from independent colleges. The data were gathered in face-to-face three-hour interviews conducted during 1986 and 1987. The 14 presidents had been in office for three years or less at the time of the interview. Two had been in office for less than one year; eight had been in office for more than one year but less than two; and four had been in office for more than two years but less than three. Three had previously been presidents of at least one other institution, the remaining eleven had been a chief academic officer or held a comparable senior position. Four presidents were insiders, either by moving into the presidency from another position within the institution, or by prior affiliation. Ten presidents were men, four

women.[1]

The data used to develop the stages of taking charge came from new presidents' responses to several open-ended questions. The interview protocols were read several times, and certain passages were abstracted in which the presidents spoke retrospectively about their initial impressions of the institution, the actions they took when they first arrived, the most important problems they had to address immediately after taking office, and the kinds of things they recommend that new presidents should do during the first few months in office. The abstracts were coded according to patterns (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

The Discovery Stage

Asked "When did you first feel 'in charge'?," most presidents will not hesitate to respond "On the day I walked into this office." Few, however, will deny the importance of learning about the institution and of getting themselves better known by it, before they commit themselves to a particular agenda. During their first few months in office, most presidents go through a discovery period in which they (as one put it) "figure out" the institution. Although the presidents interviewed for this

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[1] To comply with pledges of confidentiality, all institutions will be described as "colleges" and all presidents will be referred to with masculine pronouns.

study used different approaches to familiarize themselves with their new settings, recall the process in different ways, and attribute varying degrees of importance to it their "discovering" behaviors and activities necessarily involved "getting to know the institution," and finding ways "to become known," in the first few months in office.

Getting to Know the Institution

Getting to know the institution can demand a considerable variety of actions. Presidents seek to make sense of their new setting, to determine in what ways it is unique and in what ways it resembles other institutions, to identify who wields influence on and off campus, to assess the quality of the staff, and to learn where problems may lie. Coming to know an institution requires more than becoming familiar with its structure; it involves studying its history, observing its culture, and sensing its mood. According to one president it requires "finding out how the land lies, where the responsibility for management lies, who the strong people are." It involves actions that allow presidents to see their institutions from the vantage point of their office, for example noticing how the informal communication

networks work, and from the perspective of others, for instance by asking what others consider the major institutional problems.

One president said that the first year is spent "figuring out the college" while another said that the beginning of the presidency is the time when everyone on and off campus is "anxious to tell you everything that is wrong with the college...people want to inform you and get your attention." It represents an opportunity not to be bypassed, because once the "newness" wears off, people may not be so candid in sharing "their perceptions of the truth."

Four Ways of Getting to Know the Institution

Some used only passive and reactive approaches; they waited to be told about matters of importance, or left it up to campus participants to seek them out. Some used more aggressive approaches; perhaps they held individual meetings with department heads, or adopted a "hands on approach" in making the budget. But most presidents used both passive and active approaches, in combination as they employed four different routes to discovery.

Reading. First, presidents read to study the institution's history, to get information about its operations, or to find out how things are done within a

state system of higher education. Before his inauguration, one president had read through the "administrative code requirements," so he would not have "to spend a lot of time learning how to make a legislative request" once in office. Another, who described his institution as "under siege within and without," mentioned that prior to assuming office his college had been the subject of a "series of newspaper articles that were quite critical," and which made the institution appear to "be on the skids." A president who was particularly sensitive to the customs and traditions of his institution had extensively read the "written histories" in order to understand the culture of the college. He found out that the college was a "comfortable and civil place so I felt it was important to respect those feelings by doing things with a sense of fairness." In general, another president said it was important "to do your homework, to learn as much as possible about every aspect of the organization, to keep their door open all day long, and to read until midnight." Some presidents learned from a wealth of detail; one asked "all supervisors to send me their minutes of their meetings."

Sensing. New presidents learn about their institution from those who have been part of it for a longer time. One president felt he had to "quickly get an overview of what the college was like and to make an

assessment of where I might have problems." Another president who felt that he had been "burnt in the past by moving too fast" felt it was important to understand the "ethos and goals of the institution because you cannot come into a healthy institution and expect to turn it around." He said he was moving slowly to get to know students and faculty--"trying not to step on any toes."

Some presidents turn to the senior faculty. One relied in particular on the "tribal elders," who still had sharp ears and good eyes, but no agenda of their own to push. Identifying them took time and effort, but with the assistance of a knowledgeable and respected campus leader eventually he found them among those who serve on important university committees, and elsewhere. Some presidents look for evidence that will confirm impressions formed before assuming the position. For example, a president who explained that he "came to the college as a challenge because it was an institution in crisis" found it indeed in a "total state of disrepair; there was litter, trash, weeds, the paint was peeling from the buildings, ceilings were collapsing." One president said his goal for the first year was to listen and to look because there was a need "to establish better feelings between the faculty and administration." Other presidents when they listen and look may be more interested in how the college presents itself publicly. Reflecting about

the things he had done to prepare for the presidency, one experienced president said "I attended board meetings so I knew how the college represented itself at board meetings," to members not intimately conversant with the school.

Talking also helps presidents to learn about their institution. Some presidents try to talk with as many people on campus as they can, or as diverse a group. One president of a small college scheduled an individual session with every member of the faculty and compiled a report summarizing their concerns on the basis of these meetings. Another president gave everyone in the college the opportunity to make an appointment with him, to discuss their programs, responsibilities, or other concerns. Some presidents were more selective, and only spoke with "key players." One president explained that between his being appointed and taking office, he "took quite a bit of time to talk to two or three key individuals in the institution, and system-wide officers" about his plans for reorganization. He described the meetings as "day-long conversations with people I had confidence in."

Two presidents both of whom held a previous presidency spoke at length about their activities prior to taking office. One had

> Made several trips here [prior to assuming

> office], the purpose of these trips was to talk to a wide range of people--administrators, faculty, staff--to get a handle on what people perceived as problems and strengths of the institution. I was selected at the end of July and between then and January, I spent two to three days a week here.

Similarly, the second president

> Had half a year to prepare, and I made several trips here. When I came in, I knew about the college. I had talked to people in major units and knew their problems... I understood the institution's mission, and the power base, and from that I had a good sense about what the institution could aspire to.

Presidents also feel it is important to find out what those outside a college think. For example, one president described informal meetings with "lots of legislators, community movers and shakers, the minority community," and "having dinner with them" and asking what they thought the college should be doing. He came back from these meetings with a "fair sense of what the community thinks of us." Another made several telephone calls, almost at random: "I got such a variety of responses; there was not sense of a presence for the university--that it is a good place to send my kids." More formally another set up a "briefing with the staff of the state board, to learn their roles." An experienced president said that he would recommend new presidents of an institution like his "talk to the board and the staff, and also to faculty members and

administrators, and students, alumni, and friends of the university" and that afterwards they should

> make an honest assessment of that input, what are their perceptions of the problems and what are the real problems.

This president felt it was important to look for strengths as well, he said "what you always try to do is preserve strengths and strengthen weaknesses." Another one felt it was important to have a "gestation period--not to be too quick to change personnel and programs without analyzing how they fit the institution."

One president felt that the "informal conversations he had with the board of trustess, other administrators in the college, and the faculty" helped him develop the goals for the institution.

In describing problems they encountered initially, some presidents spoke about things they wished they had done to get to know the institution. One said "you don't have much room for mistakes...I would be more aggressive about debriefing colleagues." Another mentioned that if he had the opportunity to relive his first two years in office he would devote more time to "communicating" with campus constituencies.

Budgeting. The fourth avenue deserves separate listing because it was singled out as important to knowing the institution, in particular by the three presidents

with experience in the role. One remarked:

> When I came here, the first thing I started to work with was the budget...I welcomed that, because that is an efficient way to get to know an institution...The budget process is an excellent learning vehicle.

The second spoke of the budget as "a president's plan," because the way money is spent is "an indication of your priorities." And the third "wanted to master [the budget] quickly; I wanted to maximize the uses of the budget." Or again, he said "I familiarized myself with the budget and budgeting process [because] I did not want to spend a lot of time learning how to manipulate the budget."

All three mentioned repeatedly that the budget was their first priority, both as something to "master" and as a means by which to "understand the institution." One referred to the budget as a "president's plan" and felt that by "dominating" it, he could be in "control" of what happened in the institution.

Becoming Known

While presidents are learning about their institutions, they are also developing an identity as the new president, and sometimes thru different channels. If "knowing the institution" was a president's primary

objective, he might ask questions or debrief colleagues to get a sense of how the institution functions. But if "becoming known oneself" was the objective, presidents might stress meeting with influential individuals or accepting speaking engagements with a promising potential.

Understandably, presidents differentiate between what they do to orient themselves to a college and their efforts to establish visibility and credibility. For example, the president who interviewed all the faculty to discover their concerns about the college, had also "met with key legislators" because it was important "to become known quickly; otherwise you are seen as an unknown." Even though "getting to know the institution" and "becoming known" are treated separately here, these processes are highly interrelated, and mutually supportive.

Ways of Becoming Known

Visiting and making public statements are the most common ways of establishing relationships and gaining recognition. On campus, presidents visit with different constituencies. For example, one president who referred to the faculty as the "heart and soul of the college," said

> I have not had a chance to meet the faculty yet. I am now just starting to have lunches with them. For many, it is their first chance to get

to talk to me. I will build networks this way.

Another stressed investing "time out with the troops--with faculty, students, the community, the administration." The outlay could have real consequences: "Being liked is not trivial."

To become known, presidents also visit external constituencies. One president called this the political aspect, you go out and visit everybody...I must have given 80 speeches during the first year." Such visits fulfill multiple functions. It can be important to "become known quickly in the state structure, because you need to create the right perceptions." And a president who felt his institution was "invisible," decided to "get out in the community because no one had been out there before" and "I wanted people to think of the College as entering a new

Crisis, Familiarity, and Prior Presidential Experience as Modifying Factors

Thus far the paper has described the typical experience of new presidents in the discovery stage. Doubtless these average patterns are only approximately exact for a particular president on a particular campus. However, in the more general case of one type of institution, and two types of new presidents, special

circumstances sharply modified the workings of the discovery process.

Institutions in crisis. For a small minority of presidents, actions related to knowing the institution and becoming known were not clearly discernible. Unlike the majority, they did not explain how they became oriented to their new institutions. These presidents were at institutions in crisis and felt there was "no time to sit and study the institution"; they had to "start acting" right away "to clean up the place." Some did so in spite of others' expectations for a slower period of transition, learning, and deliberation. One president realized that the "faculty expected the president to study the institution before making a move." Yet he felt that the college was in such a "state of disrepair, physically and spiritually," that he had no choice but to introduce changes swiftly, even if it meant alienating the faculty.

While many of the presidents in the study would more than likely have agreed with the advice given by one of their colleagues: "you cannot turn inward...you must be visible and identify key external groups," the president of an institution in crisis felt that being an external president "making the rounds in talking engagements was not a luxury I could afford."

Insider Presidents. A second group that may have a shortened period of discovering includes the "insider"

presidents. One of them explained that at the beginning there is usually an "educational stage," but pointed out that for him much of this had been "bypassed" because he was not new to the college. Because they were already familiar with their school, insider presidents tended to concentrate on specific areas of weakness. Two of the four insider presidents hired teams of consultants immediately to diagnose institutional problems and make recommendations. One said "I pretty much had a plan, the first thing was to get the management structure in place, so I brought in a consulting team to do a study and recommend a structure." None of the outsider presidents mentioned having done this. Presidents who come from elsewhere are likely, at least initially, to take a more generalist approach to knowing the institution and to proceed on their own rather than through the expertise of others because they have yet to discover the institution. In contrast, insider presidents already know the setting and can focus their attention on discrete areas of concern.

Experienced Presidents. Among the 14 presidents, three had previously held at least one other presidency. These experienced presidents felt keenly that before making any pronouncements about what their administration would be like or what changes they were planning, they needed to know the institution not only as it looked from

their office but also as it looks to those who know the institution intimately from other perspectives. A good example is the president who sought out "tribal elders." Experienced presidents approached learning more aggressively and more systematically. Two had made several trips to the institution prior to assuming office, and spoke at length, in the words of one, about "getting a handle on what people perceived as the problems and strengths of the institution." Only one of the 11 first-time presidents ever mentioned an early visit to the college or this kind of early planning. The experienced presidents who spent several months preparing for the office began major decisions and institutional changes within their first few months in office.

The experienced presidents also gave noticeably more attention to the budget. None of the first-time presidents spoke as knowingly or as extensively about the budget as did the veterans.

Experienced presidents seemed more sensitive than newcomers in terms of recognizing the importance of knowing the history and understanding the culture of the institution. For example, one president explained that having been at four different institutions, he could "appreciate the uniqueness that characterizes a college." Experienced presidents appear to recognize that institutions are different from one another, even if they

are of the same type (e.g., state colleges). Rather than trying to establish how the new institution is similar to the previous one, they look for cultural and structural differences. One president spoke of "not having understood" his former institution, and of doing things there that got him into trouble because he "violated" the culture. At the new institution, he said, "I did it better and more efficiently than back there." His previous experience, he said, gave him a "checklist," but he had been "astute enough to realize that this college is different." Another experienced president compared the "discovery" period in his current and former institutions by saying "I was much more intelligent as to what to look for here than when I took the job out there."

Experienced presidents emphasized the importance of learning about the institution without having an options-reducing prior "plan of action." One said "I have always wondered about people who have plans. Much of a plan for an institution can be found in its history--what has worked in the past." More bluntly, another president said, "I think it is foolish to arrive with a plan, because colleges are subtle institutions." A plan not tailored to those subtleties, clearly, would not work.

First-time presidents were noticeably less articulate about what they did to know the institution and become known. When they spoke about the things they did much

later, such as a reorganization, a few pointed out that the kinds of changes they made were similar to changes which had been made at their previous institutions. This hints that they were more inclined to find already-familiar features, details, and characteristics in their new colleges, and to miss the important subtleties.

Consequences of The Discovery Stage

At the beginning of this paper, it was suggested that all new presidents have ambitions and expect to make a qualitative difference in the life of their institutions. The discovery stage appears to help presidents position themselves to introduce changes in the subsequent stages of taking charge. First, by getting to know the institution presidents avoid violating institutional norms. Presidents who were concerned with understanding the ethos of the institution, being careful not to "step on toes," and acting in ways that are consistent with the dominant values of the institution may appear more willing to assimilate into the environment of the institution. The transactional perspective of leadership suggests that change is more likely to be tolerated if the leader accumulates "credits" beforehand by demonstrating competence and conformity to the group's norms (Hollander, 1987). The findings of this study show that first-time

presidents do not have a clear or full sense of how they accumulate important credits--or, of how they fail to accumulate them. Second, in the process of getting to know the institution presidents also find out the needs and expectations of different constituencies. The discovery stage, then, may help presidents anticipate which changes will be supported and which opposed. Third, the discovery stage provides presidents with the opportunity to establish visibility and credibility with internal and external constituencies. Making public appearances and visiting influential individuals and groups establishes the identity of the president in the official role of head of the institution.

Although it can be speculated that the discovery stage may be critical in preparing the institution for the introduction of change, this study showed that not all presidents go through a discovery stage. Presidents of institutions in crisis and insider presidents seemed to bypass this stage. This finding suggests that the importance the discovery stage has for a new president may vary on the basis of institutional circumstances. For the president of an institution in crisis it may be more advantageous to respond immediately. In such institutions quick actions may be interpreted as reassuring and, therefore, may be a more effective approach to paving the way for more substantive changes than learning about the

institution. In a stable institution the discovery stage may be more essential because "problems" are not as detectable as in an institution in crisis. The president who come into a stable institution and attempts to introduce changes is likely to meet with opposition if he overlooks the political, symbolic, and collegial processes that are part of the discovery stage.

Some new presidents may interpret a prolonged period of learning about the institution as a sign of weakness. Many are likely to agree with the conclusion drawn by one of their colleagues: "You cannot come into the job tentatively, like animals, faculty can smell weakness." This study suggests that first-time presidents in particular do not have a clear or full sense of the importance of the discovery stage. By bringing together, the particular experiences of a number of new presidents, this paper offers a composite account that goes beyond any one individual experience.

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